



Introduction

On October 7, 2004, having received petitions from 143 neighborhood residents in support of a study, the Cambridge Historical Commission voted to initiate a Neighborhood Conservation District study for the Lower Common neighborhood. Neighborhood Conservation Districts (NCDs) are preservation areas intended to conserve distinctive places and structures in Cambridge by providing for review by a neighborhood commission over changes to the district's buildings that would permanently alter their character. The purpose of an NCD study is to determine what is distinctive about a particular neighborhood, what sorts of changes might affect the neighborhood's distinctive character, and what additional regulation, if any beyond zoning, is needed to manage the changes that will take place in the neighborhood over time.

Status Report on Study Committee Work

The city ordinance dealing with neighborhood conservation districts requires that a study committee make an investigation and report on the "historic, architectural and other relevant significance" of any neighborhood conservation district proposed for designation by the City Council. That report must recommend the boundaries of any proposed neighborhood conservation district and "general and/or specific standards and appropriate criteria" that are to be applied in making determinations under any City Council order designating a neighborhood conservation district.

The Lower Common NCD Study Committee, which includes four neighborhood residents and three members of the Cambridge Historical Commission, has been meeting regularly since March. Discussion to date has focused largely on the distinctive character of the study area and whether the Lower Common meets the city's criteria for designation as an NCD. This question is central to the definition of a neighborhood conservation district presented in city ordinance 2.78.180:

any area. . . containing places and structures which [the Historical Commission] determines are of importance to the architectural, aesthetic, cultural, political, economic or social history of the City, and which considered together cause such area to constitute a distinctive neighborhood or to have a distinctive character in terms of its exterior features.

Based on the Committee's discussions and investigation, six of the seven committee members agree that the area does constitute a "distinctive neighborhood" and has a "distinctive character in terms of its exterior features." They agree that the Lower Common meets the city's criteria for neighborhood conservation district designation. The one dissenter believes that "the important places and structures in the study area, taken together, are insufficient to make the area different enough from the rest of Cambridge either to be a distinctive neighborhood or an area having distinctive architectural character, as the ordinance requires."

What are some of the characteristics of the Lower Common?

The Study Committee has had preliminary discussions to define the exterior features that are characteristic of the study area; some of these relate to its overall layout and topography, and some pertain to the architectural features that are common to buildings in the Lower Common. These are some of the neighborhood's distinctive exterior features discussed:

- the street layout still reflects many aspects of the original 1724 partition that defined the Lower Common;
- the density and range of architectural forms in the Lower Common reflects three major periods of development;
- the Lower Common's street pattern, with abundant short blocks and many curved or right-angled streets, contributes to an unusual combination of automobile-oriented "public" through streets that contrast with pedestrian-centered "private" streets that are used mostly by residents;
- the distinct development phases have created a dense network of buildings with strong juxtapositions of style and scale;
- there are many multi-family buildings in the Lower Common, including an exceptional number of 19th-century double houses and an extensive collection of early 20th-century masonry apartment buildings; by contrast, there are very few three-decker buildings in the Lower Common;
- many of the single-family houses are large Queen Anne, Shingle Style or Colonial Revival buildings notable for their open verandas, abundant architectural details, varied rooflines, and asymmetrical massing;
- characteristic alterations of properties include the development of side-yard parking and driveways, installation of fences, enclosure of porches, and construction of garages, additions, extensions, dormers and decks.

The Committee's preliminary list of the Lower Common's architectural and physical characteristics (titled "Lower Common Characteristics") is also posted on the Historical Commission web site:
http://www.ci.cambridge.ma.us/~Historic/lowercommon_study.html.

Boundaries

Another important consideration is the boundaries of a possible Neighborhood Conservation District. The Study Area extends from the north side of Linnaean Street to the south side of Chauncy Street and from the east side of Garden Street to the apartment buildings on the west side of Massachusetts Avenue between Chauncy and Shepard streets. It contains about 261 separate parcels of land. However, the Committee has not made a decision on whether to recommend the current study area boundaries, with all of the large apartment buildings that border the district (the apartment buildings are zoned residence C-2), or whether the district should be smaller.

The Radcliffe Quad is not included in the study because it is already subject to a protocol with the Cambridge Historical Commission requiring review of alterations to National Register properties; the entire Radcliffe Quad will be nominated for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The Committee decided to remove the Montrose Spa building on

Massachusetts Avenue from any potential district; an early map of the study area erroneously included 6 Lancaster Street, which was never intended to be part of the study and which is not proposed to be included.

Review Authority

The Study Committee has not yet concluded discussions as to what review authority might be suitable for a Lower Common NCD. Unlike some of the previous NCD proposals in Cambridge, there is no “clear and present danger” threatening the character of the Lower Common neighborhood. Ch. 2.78, Article III of the city’s ordinances states that interior alterations, ordinary repairs and paint color can never be reviewed in a Neighborhood Conservation District. Alterations that are not visible from a public way are also categorically exempt from Commission review nor can any NCD or other commission make additional requirements of any applicant that are beyond the subject matter of the application that is before that commission.

Among the possible actions discussed for binding review by the Lower Common Study Committee are the following:

- 1) whether or not to reserve the strongest (binding) review authority for actions that would permanently alter the character of the Lower Common, including:
 - demolition of all or a portion of a structure,
 - construction of a new building,
 - construction of additions to existing structures that would increase their gross floor area;and possibly:
 - alterations to the three houses constructed before 1840;
 - alterations adverse to the architectural unity of the neighborhood’s double houses;
 - alterations that would insert new window or door locations;
 - alterations that would change the material or configuration of window sashes; and
 - alterations that would enclose more than 20% of the volume of an open front porch or veranda;
- 2) whether or not to exempt from review altogether actions that would not permanently alter the character of the Lower Common, including:
 - the application of siding if it does not cover decorative trim;
 - alterations that would not cause the removal of decorative trim or modify the pattern of windows or doors;
 - construction of 4’ tall fences in front yards and 6’ tall fences elsewhere on a property;
 - construction of terraces, driveways, and similar grade-level structures;
 - alterations that would change the material or configuration of window sashes; and
 - allowing complete demolition of structures without review of the replacement structure if the cost of reasonable repairs exceeds the cost of exact replacement, and finally:
- 3) whether or not to establish a procedure for non-binding (advisory) administrative review, with a provision for notification of the alteration to abutters and an appeal of administrative determinations to the NCD commission, for alterations such as:
 - the replacement of window sash;
 - insertion of new window or door locations;
 - construction of fences taller than those exempted from review; or
 - construction of driveways for front yard parking.

What’s Next: Extending Study Period beyond October 8 without Interim Protections

The Study Committee is proceeding deliberately in determining its recommendations. However, the four-month delay in commencing the study has prevented the Committee from completing the study by October 8, 2005, when the interim protections for Lower Common properties must expire. The Committee believes it should complete its work with the full consideration it requires and that the public should be kept fully informed of its progress. Therefore, the Study Committee will continue to meet as follows:

Public Notice

The Lower Common Neighborhood Conservation District Study Committee will hold public meetings on Wednesdays from 5:30 to 7:00 PM at the Harvard Epworth United Methodist Church, 1551 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, on October 5, October 19, November 2, November 16, November 30.

The public is invited and encouraged to attend.

After October 8, 2005, when the interim study period for the Lower Common NCD Study expires, the Historical Commission will no longer review applications for alterations to properties in the study area.

The Committee hopes to complete its deliberations this Fall. A formal Public Information meeting will be scheduled and a series of Neighborhood Forum meetings will be held to allow a further opportunities to address questions and receive feedback. Those dates and locations will be announced via mailings to all property owners. A Postcard Poll seeking property owners’ support or opposition to the NCD will be circulated following those forums. A Study Report will be prepared and the Cambridge Historical Commission will hold a public hearing to review the Study Report and make its recommendation regarding the NCD. If the Historical Commission votes to forward the City Council, the NCD proposal will be taken up by the City Council following that vote.

Respectfully submitted,

Lower Common Study Committee:

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